



Competency-Based Leadership for the 21st Century

Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth H. Pritchard, US Army Reserve

A RMY LEADERS need a new mix of competencies to properly shape their forces and develop their subordinates to meet 21st-century challenges. Shifting demographics, rapidly changing technology and other factors will require new patterns of leadership. US Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Military Leadership*, recognizes two leadership levels—junior and senior—and discusses leadership functions, tools and styles within two modes: direct and indirect leadership. Most of these and other basic features of the 1990 FM 22-100 will remain valid in the years to come because they are based on human nature. However, research from the “high-performance” workplace advocates two fundamental changes to the 1990 FM 22-100 and Army leadership itself: a new leadership continuum and a competency-based leadership system.

Empirical evidence from the United States and Europe shows four identifiable stages on the leadership continuum—first, middle, upper and top levels, all requiring direct and indirect modes of influence in proportions that vary by level.¹ Company grade officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) typically work at the first level—the current junior level; field grade officers typically work at the middle to upper levels—the current senior level; and general officers typically work at an executive level not covered by the 1990 FM 22-100. Current Army leadership doctrine forces the allocation of leadership into two enormous categories, when four smaller categories would provide clearer focus for more appropriate leader selection, development and management. It also provides a basis for discussion of competencies needed in the decades ahead.

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job—to help them make relevant, correct and timely decisions in the leadership of change and leadership of people. *Leadership of change* encompasses the ability to design, develop and implement an environment (domain of upper to top levels) or local setting (domain of first to middle levels) of values, standards, goals, priorities and other factors that encourage adaptation, modification and true transformation balanced by continuity, moderation and common sense. The Army needs highly competent change managers at all levels of its 21st-century force, and the final version of FM 22-100, to be released in June 1999, should emphasize this through forward-looking competency profiles.

Leadership of people in the 21st century will routinely involve joint, combined, military and civilian efforts. It encompasses ability to design and implement plans, policies and practices that maximize individual potential and group cohesion and foster high professional ethics. The predominantly

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unpredictable 21st-century world contains one certainty for the first 50 years: situational, operational, locational and human diversity that will require Army leaders at all levels to perform more diversified tasks with fewer Army resources. The 1999 FM 22-100 reflects a new Army leadership system and must feature the leadership competency clusters needed for success and high performance.

Leader selection, development and management should be integrated on the basis of leadership competencies needed along the leadership continuum for satisfactory and superior performance during an Army career. *Core* competencies are those essential characteristics needed for on-the-job success. They can vary along the continuum. For example, skill in visioning is extraneous at the first level of leadership but mandatory at the upper and top levels. It should be developed at the middle level. A tentative list of 21st-century core competencies includes:

- Tactical, technical and technological (information/computer) proficiency.
- Cognitive skills and abilities, such as numerical comprehension, oral communication and problem solving.
- Interpersonal skills and abilities, such as skill in human relations and teamwork ability.
- Personal characteristics, such as decisiveness and tenacity.

The competence level required must correlate with the level of leadership position held. For example, officers and NCOs who lead at the first level typically need to communicate instructions, descriptions and ideas so others will understand. Leaders working at the middle and upper levels need higher-order oral and written communication skills, includ-

ing skill in drawing inferences, forming hypotheses, developing logical arguments and expressing such information so that others will be convinced or persuaded. After core competencies, the Army's new leadership system should focus on *differentiating* competencies that will distinguish between superior and satisfactory leadership in the 21st century. Based on demographic patterns, operational trends of the 1990s, likely changes—such as new emphasis on aspects of homeland defense—and other factors, a tentative list of differentiating competencies for high performance leadership of change and people includes:

- *Continuous learning*—increasing current proficiencies; rapidly understanding and using new information; and mastering new skills.

- *Awareness*—knowing the interrelationships of and keeping current on key military, political, economic and social issues, trends and events that affect the organization.

- *Flexibility*—being open to change as an opportunity and having a tolerance for ambiguity; adjusting rapidly to new situations; applying different methods to meet changing priorities. The multimission-capable forces of tomorrow must be able to rapidly transition from one type of operation to another. This capacity has profound impact on leader competencies, including continuous learning, awareness and flexibility.² How successful one is in self-development, the depth and breadth of one's awareness and the degree of one's flexibility will help define high performance.

- *Resilience*—maintaining focus amid pressure; recovering quickly from setbacks; gearing up for another enemy assault. Physical and mental stamina diminishes as the speed, volume and complexity of assignments and change itself accelerate. Capacity to bounce back, no matter how intense the pressure of these factors, is essential. How quickly and fully future leaders do that will help determine high performance.

- *Initiative*—working without close supervision; initiating new assignments; looking for ways to improve matters.

- *Creativity*—providing insight; generating original ideas or innovative solutions; extending the state of the art.

- *Entrepreneurship*—leading with a sense of ownership; identifying and taking prudent risks. Improved information and communication systems will permit higher-level participation in lower-level operations, but conditions will often require more

decentralized execution. Accordingly, command and control in the 21st century will be more centralized in some operations or situations and more decentralized in others.³

- *Influencing others*—skill in affecting opinions, judgments or behaviors of others through persuasion, mediation, and so forth; causing people to do or refrain from doing something.

- *Partnering*—collaborating; working cross-organizationally; building coalitions. Multinational operations will remain the norm, interagency teaming will improve and increase in approaching the goal—seamless integration—and work with non-government organizations will expand.⁴ Ad hoc coalitions of groups will require rapid integration and true interoperability. These future environment features imply profound impact on leader competencies, including influencing others and partnering.

- *Organizational commitment*—creating and sustaining *esprit de corps* and organizational culture.

The Army has long recognized the important aspects of many of these competencies, including flexibility and reasonable risk taking, a subset of entrepreneurship. However, the 1990 FM 22-100 is way off target in its outmoded approach to competencies.⁵ Second-generation competencies provide a form uniquely geared to the high-involvement work culture the next generation will demand.⁶

The next step would be competency-based officer and enlisted human resource management systems. Competency-based systems require significant investment in people, but the potential payoff in performance is worth it—more versatile, skillful leaders performing additional, varied functions better, increased individual and group productivity and a quantum leap in effectiveness and efficiency. *People* are the key in competency-based systems. Individuals apply competencies to produce outputs—the products of performance. These outputs yield results—the consequences of performance—within the context of their internal and external environments.

Competencies are powerful enablers, not magic result producers. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that a competency-based military leadership system is one of the best ways to leverage the qualitative advantage of the American soldier in the next decade and beyond.

In an early 21st-century competency-based leadership system, the more effective middle- to executive-level leaders will fully apply key lessons from the 1990s' revitalization of corporate



US Army

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America—entrepreneurial spirit, cross-functional teams, partnering and always-open, multichannel lines of communication.⁷ They will supplement these imperatives by personal touch, such as site visits to inspect for full-potential soldier development and to ensure “best-practices” family support. Executive and upper/middle-level leaders who fully integrate indirect influence with direct, face-to-face influence will be most successful.

First-level leadership in this new age, in contrast, will be mainly direct and personal and supported by structures erected by higher-level leaders. The effective “junior” leader in the coming decades will be sensitive to cultural diversity, race and other individual differences, have well-developed

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interpersonal skills and be able to adapt leadership style to a variety of situations. This new-era leader will be able to tackle ambiguous problems in fluid situations and a freer-form Army organization. Awareness of the big picture and long-term effects of short-term actions, in union with mature judgment, self-reliance and initiative, will enable peak performance.

To promote subordinate leader development for full-spectrum dominance, middle and upper-level leaders of tomorrow should eschew what is “politically correct” and trendy and emphasize moral courage and other time-tested leadership traits. Methods of delivery will still include teaching, coaching and counseling, but the details of presentation must change for fullest effect. There should be “just-in-time” teaching of “just-enough” information in new formats, including Internet and Intranet mixes of audio and visual information, where appropriate. Information should be short and to the point in the styles familiar to the generation addressed—a “book report feel” suits today’s up-and-coming “Generation X” Army, for example.

As befits the subject, the information provided in formal sessions should be given in short bursts, with quick-cut, energetic video that is musically driven—MTV-style presentations attracts Generation X’s attention. The “Millennium Generation”—those younger than 18 today—is in the same mode as Generation X but moving faster. The younger half of this group, which will come of military age beginning in 2008, only knows “high-tech.” The perspectives and supporting skills of the Generation X executive and senior leaders who will be in charge then must keep pace.

Coaching should change, too. Good coaching in the early to middle 21st century will likely include constructive use of generational and cultural peer teams to ensure full development of a unified “team spirit” that is now a staple of leading-edge American businesses.

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Today’s Army stands at the threshold of a new military era, the information-age force in the “new world disorder.” No single element is more important to full-spectrum military power development than the quality of leadership. The next two generations of Army leaders need a new leadership system, one that blends the very best of the tried-and-true with the most promising of the up-and-coming. It’s a big job, but today’s Army can do it. **MR**

NOTES

1. See Center for Creative Leadership *Capabilities 1998* and <http://www.ccl.org/leadership.htm>, for key private sector findings. A web search for “competencies” will yield nearly 50,000 matches and provide links to federal, state, academic and corporate sites concerning leadership, managerial and supervisory competencies.
2. *Joint Vision 2010*, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 1996, especially 28 and 29, and *Concept for Future Joint Operations, Expanding Joint Vision 2010*, Joint Warfighting Center, May 1997, especially 19-21.
3. *Concept for Future Joint Operations, Expanding Joint Vision 2010*, 67-69.
4. See *Joint Vision 2010*, 9, 28 and 29; *Concept for Future Operations, Expanding Joint Vision 2010*, especially 12, 20 and 77; and *Managing Complex Contingency Operations*, Presidential Decision Document 56, June 1997.
5. US Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Military Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990). The leadership competencies found in Appendix A were developed from a 1976 study.
6. See Spencer, McClelland and Spencer, *Competency Assessment Methods, History and State of the Art* (Hay/McBer Research Press, 1994).
7. See Steven Pearlstein, “Reinventing Xerox Corporation,” *The Washington Post*, 29 June 1998, and research available from the Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, NC, and on line from other sources.

Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth H. Pritchard is an operations research analyst in the US Special Operations Command’s Operations, Plans and Policy Center, specializing in civil-military issues. He received a B.A. from the University of Maryland and is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College. He has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the active Army, Maryland Army National Guard and US Army Reserve, including commander, 450th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne), which supports the 82d Airborne Division worldwide. His article “The Army and Civil-Military Operations in the 21st Century” appeared in the December 1997 ARMY magazine as second-place winner in its 1997 essay contest.